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Guardsman takes on task of teaching Scottsdale kids

By Andrea Falkenhagen
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The rumor mill was in full swing among the sixthgraders at Navajo Elementary School on Wednesday by the time most students met their science teacher for the first time. "Are you going to be, like, a drill sergeant in the this class?" one boy asked teacher Tom George.

Another asked the Army National Guard major if he was going into the Navy.

George of Scottsdale is used to the questions.

After three years at Navajo and 10 years of substitute teaching, he's heard them all.

Yes, he was an Army helicopter pilot during military operations in Kosovo.

Yes, he has been shot at.

He also is Scottsdale's lone member of Troops to Teachers, a program developed by the Department of Defense in 1994 to help military personnel begin new careers as schoolteachers.

If eligible for financial assistance, former servicemen and women receive up to \$5,000 for classes required for teaching certification.

Other troops pay for their education through funding in the G.I. Bill and instead receive a financial bonus of \$10,000 after agreeing to teach at a high-poverty school for at least three years.

Soldiers bring a rich background with them into the classrooms, along with a sense of perseverance and focus, said John Scheuer, Arizona's Troops to Teachers director.

"You'll hear that we never leave a soldier behind. Well, they take that into the classroom and see that no child is left behind," Scheuer said.

"They stick with the kids. They bring discipline.

"They are used to having a task or objective that needs to be done."


About 600 men and women in Arizona participate in the program.

While George didn't expect to teach science - his bachelor's degrees from Arizona State University are in criminal justice and sociology - he said his Army experiences help him with the subject.

On Wednesday, he used a small model of a Blackhawk helicopter to talk about physics and the Earth's atmosphere.

"By flying helicopters, I had a lot of force-physics experience," he said.

"I'm very happy the program is out there. It's a great second career."

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